

Celebrating the singular sound of Harrison Birtwistle's music

Letters to The Guardian, Saturday 23rd of April 2022

Thank you for your marvellous obituary of Harrison Birtwistle (19 April), Accrington's greatest son (and I'm not forgetting Dave "Haggis" Hargreaves, Accrington Stanley's record goalscorer).

Harri never deviated from his principles. As a result, he did not succumb to the temptation – as other composers of his, and the newer, generation have done – to write occasional popular pieces suitable for Classic FM playlists.

Like Benjamin Britten, I walked out halfway through his Punch and Judy due to defeated eardrums. But I have been enthralled by Panic, which so disturbed traditional Prom-goers, The Minotaur (rated by the Guardian as the third best piece of classical music in the 21st century) and much else of his output. None of Harri's stuff is pleasant listening, but that's rather the point. You have to fight to get through the thicket of sound to the underlying musical thought. In an age where so much "classical" music is intellectual pap (forgive me, Messrs Einaudi, Rutter, Jenkins, etc), Harri stood out like a giant

- Simon Lawton-Smith, Lewisham, London

Without the slightest fuss, let alone flamboyance, Sir Harrison Birtwistle became one of the towering figures in British music. He always spoke his mind, tellingly and with a calm exactness that was memorable. Decades ago, I was involved putting on performances of some of his works (eg a student performance of Down by the Greenwood Side at Kingston Polytechnic) and wrote articles about his works. He always said things that were illuminating and hit the nail on the head. And he was great fun. Not long ago, after I'd been ill, I attended a performance of one of his pieces and went backstage afterwards to talk to him. Before leaving, I said to him: "You know, Harri, the doctor doesn't think I've got long to live.". He looked me up and down and replied: "You look all right to me. Tell the doctor to bugger off."

One of this country's treasures

- Meirion Bowen, London

While I agree with everything said about Harrison Birtwistle in your obituary, there seems to me to be one serious omission from his accepted canon – his opera Yan Tan Tethera. My wife and I were at the opening night on the South Bank in 1986 and it haunted us for years. Such a shame that it has slid into almost complete obscurity – a magical, mystical piece that tugs at the heartstrings.

- Kay Smith, Leeds

GRITTY COMPOSER

*Times Letters, letters to the editor Monday
April 25 2022*

Sir, Richard Morrison is quite right to hail the fierce challenge offered by much of Sir Harrison Birtwistle's music ("We need to be challenged. Let's not pillory uncompromising artists", *Times*, Apr 23). He was, though, a supremely practical musician, as witness his eight years as head of music at the National Theatre, during which time he wrote a number of highly effective sets of incidental music, not least the bracing but perfectly Elizabethan score for the *As You Like It* in which I played Orlando; later he treated Mozart's music in *Amadeus* electronically, to subtle effect. He also, terrifyingly, undertook to teach me to appear to play the piano in that play ("Come on you bugger, you can do better than that!"). In life, as in his music, Harry was always his own man: when he was knighted, as Her Majesty tapped his shoulder with the ceremonial sword, the band, with perfect judgment, struck up "I did it my way"

- **Simon Callow London N8**